

voted against approval by a resounding margin of 20 to 3.

During the panel's public testimony session, several of the members who eventually voted against approval said they were theoretically in favour of over the counter statins but needed to see better data.

They were particularly concerned by a joint marketing study by Merck and Johnson & Johnson, in which the companies tried to gauge whether people who would benefit from the drug would buy it. To mimic the over the counter setting, they opened 14 mock pharmacies across the United States offering lovastatin without prescription. Of 3316 customers offered the drug, 1061 decided they would buy it. The companies' analysis suggested that 80% of these customers had risk factors that justified their decision. But the FDA panel concluded that only about 55% of the purchases would have been appropriate.

Owen Dyer *London*

US drug industry's claims of countries "freeloading" are a myth

A member of George Bush's Presidential Business Commission—a group of business and professional people advising him on the next election—has launched a scathing attack on the US pharmaceutical industry and on the industry's claims that other countries are damaging drug development by paying lower prices.

Delivering the David Rogers lecture at Cornell Medical College in New York last month, bioethicist Donald Light said that no evidence existed to support the view that European nations were free-loading and that the current US attempts to raise prices through free-trade agreements with other countries were simply designed to boost profits, not research and development.

A former fellow at Princeton University, New Jersey, Professor Light holds academic appointments at the University of Pennsylvania and the University of Medicine and Dentistry of

New Jersey. He is also a member of the National Republican Business Advisory Council.

His lecture was particularly critical of a landmark 2003 speech given by the then FDA commissioner, Mark McClellan, which claimed that lower foreign drug prices were unfair to the United States, and were slowing drug development worldwide.

Ray Moynihan *Sydney*

Professor Light's lecture is available at www.bioethics.upenn.edu

US health agency scales down plans for free, online research results

The US health agency, the National Institutes of Health (NIH), has modified its plans to make the results of nationally funded research available free of charge after pressure from scientific publishers who claim the policy will damage their profits.

Instead of making the results available on a publicly accessible website within six months of publication in a scientific journal, as originally planned, the agency has extended the deadline for posting results to a year.

Many supporters of public access have been angered by the extension, says a report in the *Washington Post* (2005;18 Jan:A15). They argue that the public has already paid for the research through taxes and should not have to pay to see the outcome by subscribing to journals or downloading articles through a journal website, which can cost \$100 (£54; €77) for two or three items.

The announcement of the policy, which was due to take place last week, was cancelled at the last minute. The delay in launching the plan is thought to be to avoid it clashing with confirmation hearings for Michael Leavitt, President Bush's nominee for the post of secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, of which the NIH is a part.

At the time of going to press NIH was unable to confirm the deadline extension.

Zosia Kmietowicz *London*

Generosity after tsunami could threaten neglected crises

Peter Moszynski *London*

The billions of dollars pledged to help reconstruction after the tsunami shows "humanity at its very best," said Jan Egeland, United Nations under secretary general for humanitarian affairs, in Geneva last week at the launch of the UN's annual humanitarian appeal process.

But he urged donors not to divert funds from other crises. "It would be the ultimate disappointment for us," he said, "and tragedy for the victims in all those other areas where we are struggling to keep programmes going on existing levels of assistance, were they to suffer."

Mr Egeland said that 2005 had started better than any other year, with billions of dollars donated to help survivors of the tsunami. But 2004 had been "a mixed year" in terms of generosity for the most vulnerable. In some areas, the UN did not even have one third of the sum needed.

"Twenty six million people in war affected regions need aid to stay alive, and large numbers of them hope for improved conditions in the year ahead," said Mr Egeland. The world should agree that it was "as terrible to starve in Darfur, Sudan, as it was to starve on the beaches of tsunami stricken nations." If all human life is worth the same, the same generosity should be granted to all in need. "Humanitarian donor nations must work together to make sure that populations in need are not forgotten."

"Our experience is that politicians only give large

amounts of aid when the level of suffering on television demands a public response. By then it is usually too late and always too little. And disasters that do not get a high media profile—that's most of them—do not get money," said the executive director of Oxfam International, Jeremy Hobbs.

Mr Egeland said that although UN appeals for Iraq, Kosovo, and the tsunami could be met, it was "a nightmare" trying to fund Africa's needs. "Iraq and Afghanistan and Kosovo and Bosnia have been able to attract more attention and resources than the 15 African emergencies combined. The neglected emergencies remain as neglected as they have always been. This is what the secretary general and I are trying to change when we launch this appeal for 14 forgotten and largely neglected crises."

The Disasters Emergencies Committee, the body coordinating the most important appeals for the main British charities, announced that it is scaling down its activities after receiving pledges of almost £200m (\$372m; €284m) for its tsunami appeal. It raised as much money in the first two days as it did in a year for its Sudan appeal.

The UN is appealing for \$1.7bn for humanitarian activities in 14 countries worldwide. This does not include another similar sum for Sudan, which is covered by a separate UN appeal. □



People in Nagapattinam, Tamil Nadu, clamour for food aid being distributed after the tsunami

DIETER TELEMANS/PANOS